

Rear Admiral William A. Moffett
1869-1933



William Moffett was the architect of naval aviation. During the critical formative years of the 1920s and 1930s, Moffett shaped the way the U.S. Navy would use air power.

Born in Charleston, South Carolina during the Reconstruction years, Moffett graduated from the Naval Academy in 1890, and was awarded the Medal of Honor as captain of the cruiser Chester during the 1914 landing at Veracruz. His first foray into aviation came during World War I when, as commanding officer at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center near Chicago, he joined with local business leaders to launch an aviation training program. Later, commanding the superdreadnaught battleship Mississippi, he supported the formation of a ship plane unit for spotting and scouting.

Moffett became known as the Air Admiral, though he was not by training an aviator. He championed the creation of the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics, established in 1921, then served as its chief until his death in 1933. As chief of BuAer, Moffett integrated the tactical use of airplanes and airships with fleet operations, managed the introduction of new technologies like the aircraft carrier, rationalized procurement to bring stability to the burgeoning American aircraft industry, and created new training and career paths for aviators. Moffett very skillfully used public relations opportunities to build support for naval aviation in a time of tight defense budgets, and he skillfully confronted General Billy Mitchell when Mitchell called for a unified air force at the expense of a separate naval air arm. Moffett saw aviation as an integral, organic part of the fleet.

Moffett also advocated large rigid airships as a solution to naval reconnaissance problems. He chaired the committee that established, in February 1931, the Sunnyvale Naval Air Station as a West Coast base for the dirigible Macon. Moffett lost his life when the airship Akron went down off the coast of New Jersey on 3 April 1933. With 73 people dead or missing, the loss of the Akron was to that point America's worst aviation accident. The Sunnyvale station opened only eight days after his death and, in June 1933, the Navy changed its name to Naval Air Station, Sunnyvale, Moffett Field.

For further reading, see William F. Trimble, Admiral William A. Moffett: Architect of Naval Aviation. Smithsonian History of Aviation Series (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994) Call number V63.M57T75 1993